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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Address Delivered by Mr. Bryan at a Dinner given at Washington, D. C., April 13, 1903, by the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association.

Mr. Toastmaster, and Fellow-Citizens: I hardly feel that I ought to detain the banqueters or take their thoughts away from the magnificent speech to which we have just listened from the governor of the state which gave Thomas Jefferson to the Union. It was so complete, so felicitous in expression and so true, that nothing can be added in the way of eulogy; and if it were not that I have been assigned a particular subject I would not attempt a speech.

This evening has been one of great delight to me. I am a believer in Thomas Jefferson, and in his principles, and I am glad to come from Nebraska to Washington join this association in the inauguration of this movement to raise a monument to his memory. I deem it an honor to attend this dinner, given under the auspices of an association at whose head stands Admiral Dewey, the highest man in the navy of the nation, and to sit at the board with General Miles, the highest soldier in the army of the nation; to follow Senator Hoar, the nestor of the United States senate, and to speak with ex-Secretary Smith, who represents a profession—which I must admit to be an influential profession—namely, journalism; and with so distinguished an educator as President Needham.

I cannot say anything about the purpose of this organization that has not been better said by Mr. Lipscomb, who shares with Mr. McKean the honor of originating it; but I can join with them in the enjoyment of this occasion, and, my friends, if any of you wonder why one who advocates earnestly as I do the political principles of Thomas Jefferson, should on this occasion take Religion rather than Politics as his theme, I might explain to you that to hear republicans praise Jefferson as they have tonight makes a democrat feel religious.

I can give a general indorsement to the general eulogy pronounced by Senator Hoar, and a particular commendation to the particular indorsement given by the gentlemen from Philadelphia. I have heard Zacheus mentioned in connection with Philadelphia, but I confess that the version of the story as I heard it tonight was new to me. The only reason I have ever heard given why Zaccheus and Philadelphia should be named in the same breath was that there was a request preferred to Zaccheus which is often preferred in Philadelphia—"Come down."

I am not disposed to be controversial tonight, but it requires all the Christian forbearance that I have been able to cultivate since I joined the church at the age of 14, not to say something in reply to the remarks made about expansion.

I agree with Jefferson rather than with my friend from Pennsylvania in estimating the relative importance of what Jefferson did. It gave me, I think, a better insight into the character of Jefferson than I had ever had before when I read the inscription which he himself suggested for his monument—the inscription to which our toastmaster has eloquently referred. Jefferson was a political philosopher, and as has been said, he thought far in advance of his time. And yet he differed in one essential particular from the philosophers who do not live to see the triumph of their ideas. He proclaimed great living truths, and then applied those truths to the questions with which he had to deal. Some have contented themselves with laying down abstract principles, and have not sought to give them vitality in the present day; but Jefferson not only saw the future, but he saw the present, and we have this great advantage in the study of the principles of Jefferson, that he gave us those principles embodied in legislation. I have been more and more surprised as I have studied the questions with which we have to deal, to find that there is no subject with which our people grapple today that he did not consider in principle. Take the questions that are subjects of controversy and you will find that he stated principles and applied principles at that time that apply to the questions at this time; and today we do not have to go beyond his writings to find principles that will solve aright the problems of today. He saw great fundamental truths, self-evident truths, if you please, and I am coming to believe that there are not only self-evident truths, but that all truth is self-evident, and that the best service that a man can render to a truth is to state it so that it can be understood. Jefferson had the power of statement, and he stated the truths so that they could be understood. I do not mean to speak lightly of the work of Jefferson in purchasing the Louisiana territory, but, my friends, if that territory had not been bought then it would have been bought afterward, for it was there and it was necessary that it should become American territory; I cannot believe, therefore, that the purchase of that land—dull, inanimate matter—can be compared with the proclamation of immortal truth. I place far above any purchase of acres or square miles, the utterance of those truths upon which human liberty must rest. Philosophy is above geography. Jefferson rightly measured his own work when he looked back over a long and eventful life, and, ignoring the foot-hills of honor saw only the mountain peaks of service. He gave to us proof that the Bible is right when it fixes service as the measure of greatness. You will remember that when there was a controversy as to which should be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, and the question was brought to the Master, He said: "Let him who would be chiefest among you be the servant of all."

So Jefferson, when he looked back over his life saw, not the things that he had received, but the things that he had given to the world; not the things men had done for him, but the things he had done for mankind.

I have been asked to speak of the statute for establishing Religious Freedom, written by Thomas Jefferson, and enacted by the state of Virginia in 1786, about eight years after it was drafted. Let me read you the statute:

> "That the general assembly do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent, or support, any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities."

The conciseness to which Governor Montague has referred is well illustrated in this statute. Read it over. There is not a superfluous word, and yet there is enough to guard religious liberty. It is not strange that this doctrine so well set forth by Jefferson more than a century ago, is now a part of the constitution or bill of rights of every state of this Union. Not only is that today the law of this land, but it is spreading throughout the world. It was only a few weeks ago that the czar of Russia issued a decree in which he acknowledged the right of all the subjects of his empire to worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences. And, my friends, I believe that when we come to measure the relative importance of things, the importance of an act like that, the very foundation upon which we build religious liberty, the importance of an act like that which, gradually spreading, has become the creed of eighty millions of people, and is ultimately to become the creed of all the world—when we come to consider the vast importance of a thing like that, how can we compare lands or earthly possessions with it?

In the preamble to this statute Jefferson set forth the main reasons urged by those who believed in religious freedom. Let me call attention to some of the more important ones. He said, in the first place, that to attempt to compel people to accept a religious doctrine, by act of law, was to make, not Christians, but hypocrites. That was one of the reasons, and it was a strong one. He said, too, that there was no earthly judge who was competent to sit in a case and try a man for his religious opinions, for the judgment of the court, he said, would not be a judgment of law, but would be the personal opinion of the judge. What could be more true? No man who has religious convictions himself bears them so lightly that he can lay them aside and act as a judge when another man's religious convictions are involved. Then he suggested—and I think that I am justified in elaborating upon this suggestion a moment—that religion does not need the support of government to enable it to overcome error. Let me read the exact words, for I cannot change them without doing injury to them:

> And finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself; that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist of error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons—free argument and debate; errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

Tell me that Jefferson lacked reverence for religion! He rather lacks reverence who believes religion is unable to defend herself in a contest with error. He places a low estimate upon the strength of religion, who thinks that the wisdom

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